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ABSTRACT

To get students started in story writing, teachers can divide them into groups and ask each group to create a story from a plot provided by one student, a character provided by another, and a setting provided by a third. In preparation for this activity, the teacher should instruct students in the development of the story elements of plot, characterization, setting and time period, providing relevant writing practice after the discussion of each element. When students have become proficient in preparing story elements, each student is asked to write a description of either a plot, character, or setting; they are then grouped into appropriate triads and are asked to combine their three diverse elements to create a story. Variations involve students in writing stories based on elements drawn randomly from previously prepared collections or on one element supplied to the class as a whole and two elements drawn individually from collections. After stories have been written, comparisons and contrasts may be made. Among the benefits of this technique are that divergent thinking and originality are rewarded, self-initiated activity is fostered, democratic processes are used, and provision is made for the acquisition of numerous language arts skills. (GT)

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Three to Get Started: Story Writing as a Collaborative Effort

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There are as many ways to start writing a story and there are as many ways to gather ideas for a story as there are writers. One technique that I have designed to get young writers started is what I term "crashing elements." It has proven to be useful. I use the term, "crashing elements," to show how a plot provided by one student, a character provided by another student, and a setting provided by a third student are forged together into a story. The students are not told beforehand that these individual elements will be brought together into one story.

The following is an illustration of what happens. One student may develop the plot of a jewel theft, another develop the character of a mouse, another develop the description of a cargo ship. The students then come together with the three elements which have been independently written. Their task is to find relationships among these elements and to fashion a story, by completing the details and adding more characters if they choose. One can just imagine how a mouse on a cargo ship gets involved in a jewel theft! As the students are engaged in the process of synthesis, that is, in bringing together ideas which will produce a unique communication, they are developing creativity.

The teacher prepares for this activity by instructing the class in the development of each element. The preparation phase begins with an explanation of the plot. Basic plots are described through the consideration of conflicts. Such conflicts may be man against man, man against nature, man against himself. Conflicts should be stated in terms appropriate to the students' level of understanding and discussed in relation to events with which they are familiar. If the concept, plot, is too difficult, terms

such as story line, scheme, theme, or plan, may be used. Story lines may be obtained from familiar stories, movies, or newspaper accounts. Newspaper accounts have proved to be valuable sources of ideas fro professional writers. Let the students have some practice in writing plots or plans.

Next, the teacher should demonstrate some ways to think about the selection of a character. Begin by having pupils think about living things as a general classification. Separate these into the animal world and human beings. Ask pupils to select one or the other. If "human beings" is selected, separate these into male and female, then into young and old, and thus narrow the choice to a somewhat definite age. Several other classifications may be presented in order to have the pupils reflect upon a character who is authentic. For example, if a 14 year old boy is chosen, ask several questions of classification, such as: Is he Caucasian, Black, Oriental, Indian, European? Is he a native of America, Europe, Asia, Africa? Is he rich or poor? What does he look like? Ask for physical factors. Have the students write their descriptions in greater detail. Provide practice in writing descriptions of characters.

The third "crashing element" is setting. To demonstrate some ways to think about the selection of a setting, begin by having students visualize the universe. Then, separate the universe into the world and outer space. Ask the class to select one of these areas. If the world is chosen, separate the world into two hemispheres. Ask the class to select one of these. If the western hemisphere is selected, separate the western world into continents. Continue with this process until the choice is narrowed to a particular country. When the country has been

selected the location may be narrowed to rural or urban. Now show the class how to describe the features of this particular place in order to make it authentic, and how to do the limited research which may be necessary at this point. Provide practice in describing the particular location which has been selected by each student.

Closely related to the setting is the time period. Treat the selection of time in somewhat the same manner as the selection of setting. Begin by separating time into past, present, and future. If, for example, the past is selected, guide the class towards the selection of a particular period of the past. Show how to combine descriptions of setting with descriptions of time, always emphasizing authenticity.

These foregoing activities provide materials for young writers and help them develop skills in descriptive writing. They should be continued until students become proficient in the preparation of story elements. When there has been sufficient practice in thinking about the three elements of a story and in writing descriptions of these elements, the teacher assigns one element to be written by each student. For example, "Alan, you write a basic plot in a paragraph or two." "Chris, you write a description of a character." "Dan, you write a description of a setting and time period. Proceed in this manner until each student has an assignment. Repeat the assignments in order; plot, character, setting. The students are not told what the next step is to be. When all have completed their assignments,

have groups of three get together, each group including one who wrote a plot, one who described a character and one who described a setting. When groups of three have been assembled ask each person in the group to read his description to the others. Then ask the group to share ideas about how these diverse elements may be put together to create a story. The group has many alternatives and several decisions to make: (1) Is the story to be funny or serious or both? (2) Is the story to be for young readers or older readers or both? (3) Is the story to be told in the first person or third person? (4) Do elements need to be altered? (5) How are the elements to be altered? (6) Are additional characters needed? (7) Who is to write about additional characters? (8) Who is to check for authenticity of time and place? (9) Is the story to be fantasy or factual? (10) Is there to be one story or should there be three stories?

Once this technique for story writing has been tried, it may be used again with ease and with variations. For example, students may be asked to draw elements from collections or files prepared previously. Descriptions are kept in boxes labelled "plots," "characters," and "settings"; students are encouraged to add to these collections from time to time. Later on this activity may be carried on by groups who choose to collaborate or by capable individuals. It becomes a means of fostering creative thinking and providing practice in written expression, as is evident when variations and adaptations are made. For example, a particular setting may be assigned to the whole class, but each student must draw his plot from the plot file and his character from the character file. After stories have been written,

comparisons and contrasts may be made. Again, a specific character may be drawn from the file for the whole class to use. Then, each pupil draws his own setting and plot from the files. After stories have been written comparisons and contrasts may be made. Other variations will depend on the teacher. A specific type of story may be assigned, such as comedy or tragedy; then the three elements are drawn from the collections. A specific number of characters may be assigned to students; then the elements of plot and setting are drawn from the files by individual students. The variations and the adaptations of this technique will depend on the interests, abilities, and experiences of the students, as well as on the enthusiasm of the teacher.

If they are to learn language arts students should be introduced to techniques which will give them both ideas to think about and practice in the skills of writing. This technique engages students in talking and in listening to one another as they share ideas and develop ideas. It engages students in tasks which help them to become more aware of the world around them, of environments, people, places, space and time. It develops powers of observations, discrimination, insight into human behavior, compassion, and imagination. It focuses attention on individual characters with respect to their appearance, gestures, manners and values. It enhances curiosity about other places and other times. In the process of teaching not all outcomes can be foreseen by the teacher. In creative teaching something different or unique may be an unforeseen outcome, because divergent thinking processes are emphasized and open-ended situations are utilized as the teacher encourages the students to face the unknown by themselves. In activities such as

the "crashing elements" technique the students are encouraged to generate and develop their own ideas; uniqueness and originality are rewarded; the orientation is towards success; self-initiated activity is fostered; democratic processes are employed; and provision is made for the acquisition of numerous skills of the language arts.